Pakistan fall to Syria in penultimate Asian Cup qualifier

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan's search for a first international victory since 2023 goes on after Nolberto Solano's men were thrashed 5-0 by Syria in their penultimate qualifier for the 2027 AFC Asian Cup at the Jinnah Stadium in Islamabad on Tuesday.

Having drawn their last two matches against Afghanistan, Pakistan were looking to trump the odds against the side that had already secured top spot in Group 'E' and a spot at the continental showpiece in Saudi Arabia.

In the end, they were comfortably beaten by a Syrian team, missing several regulars, as Mohammad Al-Hallaq scored a brace; his goals coming in a 15-minute spell either side of half-time, before substitutes Yassin Samiah, twice, and Alaa Al Dali got on the scoresheet to make it five wins out of five for their side.

Pakistan suffered an injury blow early on when defender Abdullah Shah suffered a fall and had to substituted in the 26th minute.

Seven minutes later, Al Hallaq — who plays for Jordanian club Al Faisaly — doubled his international goal tally when he turned in Zakaria Hannan's cutback from the right.

The half-time whistle gave Pakistan a chance to regroup but they were soon further behind when Al Hallaq doubled Syria's lead three minutes into the second half.

Ramadan threaded a well-timed through ball to Mahmoud Al Mawas, whose initial effort was blocked by Pakistan keeper Adam Ahmed, but the rebound fell perfectly for Al Hallaq to slam home.

Solano rang the changes, bringing on Kaleemullah and Alamgir Ghazi to breathe fresh impetus to his side but Syria continued to dominate and it was instead their substitutes who had a greater impact.

Samiah got the third 11 minutes from time, applying the finishing touches to a move started by Al Hallaq and setting the tone of a wild close where Pakistan collapsed.

In the final minute, Al Dali latched onto a through ball before he rounded up Adam Khan slotted into an empty net.

Samiah got his second when he was the first to get on the end of another searing counterattack and turned the ball in from close range to complete the scoring.

The loss means Pakistan have not won in 11 matches since they beat Cambodia for a historic first World Cup qualifying victory exactly two years ago.—Agencies

Wood back bowling after injury scare

PERTH: Veteran pace ace Mark Wood unleashed a fiery spell in the nets Tuesday in encouraging signs for England after an injury scare during a pre-Ashes warm-up match last week.

The 35-year-old thundered down at what appeared to be top speed off his full run after a tentative start in the tourists' first training session at Perth Stadium ahead of the opening Test against Australia on Friday.

Wood sent shudders through the England camp last week when he complained of left hamstring stiffness and was sent for scans.

He came through the Tests unscathed, but didn't bowl again in the three-day match against the second-tier England Lions.

It was his first game in almost nine months following knee surgery and he only got through eight overs.

"He was absolutely rapid today. I can tell you that first hand," wicket-keeper Jamie Smith, who drew the short straw and faced him in the nets, told reporters. "He was near enough full tilt, so it's good signs for us."

Whether the 37-Test veteran, who regularly clocks speeds of more than 150 kph (93 mph), plays the first Test remains to be seen.

Fellow pacer Josh Tongue said he believed Wood was capable of playing this week.

"If his body's all good and the management think he's good to go, I don't see why not," Tongue told reporters.

England, who last lifted the Ashes urn at home in 2015, have lost 13 of their last 15 Tests in Australia. The other two were drawn.

England have been dealt a stroke of luck for the first Test, with Australian captain Pat Cummins and veteran bowler Josh Hazlewood both sidelined by injuries.

However, Smith stressed that Australia had no dearth of quality, even with the two notable absences.

"I'd still feel they've [Australia] got a dominant attack... Obviously the two guys missing, obviously world-class players," the 25-year-old added. "But any time you play Australia, you know that the guys coming in are also fantastic players as well.

"You show a lot of respect to the guys that are missing out and the guys coming in just trying to focus on, you know what we can do well, leading up to this first Test."—Agencies

PAKISTAN batter Fakhar Zaman plays a shot during the Twenty20 International tri-series match against Zimbabwe at the Rawalpindi Cricket Stadium on Tuesday.—Tanveer Shahzad/White Star

Fakhar, Usman steer Pakistan to five-wicket win over Zimbabwe in tri-series opener

By Kashif Abbasi

RAWALPINDI: Fakhar Zaman's belligerent 45 and Usman Khan's cool-headed unbeaten 37 guided Pakistan to a five-wicket victory over a spirited Zimbabwe in the opening match of the T20 tri-series here at the Rawalpindi Cricket Stadium on Tuesday night.

Chasing 148, Pakistan were tottering at 30-3 inside the powerplay and later 115-5 when Fakhar fell with 33 still needed off 24 balls.

But Usman, dropped twice, kept his nerve in a match-defining unbroken 36-run stand with Mohammad Nawaz (20 not out off 12), who sealed the win with back-to-back boundaries off Tinotenda Maposa in the penultimate over.

The victory — achieved with four balls to spare — gave Pakistan a perfect start ahead of their clash against Sri Lanka, while Zimbabwe will rue fielding lapses and a costly no-ball at a crucial juncture.

Earlier, Sikandar Raza's fighting unbeaten 34 from 24 balls lifted Zimbabwe to 147-8 after Pakistan's spinners had triggered a familiar collapse.

The visitors were cruising at 72 without loss in the eighth over before losing eight wickets for 75 runs in a chaotic 12-over spell.

Openers Brian Bennett (49 off 36) and Tadiwanashe Marumani (30 off 22) had given Zimbabwe a flying start, hammering 59 in the powerplay.

But the introduction of spin changed everything. Nawaz broke the stand when Marumani picked out Shaheen Shah Afridi at deep square leg, and two overs later Brendan Taylor was run out for 14 by a sharp Babar Azam throw.

Bennett fell one short of a fifty, chipping Saim Ayub to the bowler, and Ryan Burl holed out for eight as Zimbabwe slipped to 106-4.

Two run-outs and tidy bowling from Abrar Ahmed (1-28) and Nawaz (2-22) left them reeling at 128-8 before Raza's late flourish — including a flicked four and a full-toss six off Shaheen — dragged them past 140.

Pakistan's reply began shakily. Sahibzada Farhan (16) was bowled through the gate by Brad Evans, who then trapped Babar Azam lbw for a three-ball duck in the same over — the former captain falling umpire's call on review.

Skipper Salman Ali Agha lasted just two balls before Maposa's inswinging yorker pinned him plumb.

Saim (22 off 26) struggled for timing before lofting Graeme Cremer to deep square leg. At 54-4, the chase threatened to unravel.

Fakhar, pushed down to number five from his usual opening slot, changed the complexion with a 61-run stand alongside Usman.

The left-hander announced himself with a monstrous straight six off Maposa and followed it with a rocket-like drive for four off Cremer.

He looked set for a match-defining knock until, on 45, he tickled a clever Richard Ngarava cutter to wicket-keeper Taylor with 33 still required.

Usman, who survived a tough chance on 27 when Raza couldn't pouch a low drive, kept the scoreboard ticking.

Nawaz provided the late acceleration, launching Evans for a huge six over long-on before a dropped catch off the same bowler and a no-ball gifted Pakistan crucial breathing space.

In the final over, with five needed, Nawaz deftly guided a wide yorker past the keeper for four and then slashed the winning boundary through point.

Scoreboard

ZIMBABWE:

B. Bennett c&b Saim	49
T. Marumani c Shaheen b Nawaz	30
B. Taylor run out	14
R. Burl c Babar b Nawaz	8
S. Raza not out	34
T. Munyonga run out	3
T. Musekiwa b Abrar	2
B. Evans c Agha b Shaheen	2
T. Maposa b Salman Mirza	1
R. Ngarava not out	1
EXTRAS (W-3)	3
TOTAL (for eight wickets, 20 overs)	147

DID NOT BAT: G. Cremer

FALL OF WICKETS: 1-72 (Marumani), 2-91 (Taylor), 3-94 (Bennett), 4-106 (Burl), 5-112 (Munyonga), 6-119 (Musekiwa), 7-125 (Evans), 8-128 (Maposa)

BOWLING: Shaheen 4-0-34-1 (1w), Salman Mirza 3-0-21-1 (1w), Faheem 1-0-11-0, Saim 4-0-31-1 (1w), Abrar 4-0-28-1, Nawaz 4-0-22-2

PAKISTAN:

Sahibzada Farhan b Evans	16
Saim Ayub c Musekiwa b Cremer	22
Babar Azam lbw b Evans	0
Salman Ali Agha lbw b Maposa	1
Fakhar Zaman c Taylor b Ngarava	44
Usman Khan not out	37
Mohammad Nawaz not out	20
EXTRAS (B-2, LB-4, NB-2, W-3)	11
TOTAL (for five wickets, 19.2 overs)	151

DID NOT BAT: Faheem Ashraf, Salman Mirza, Shaheen Shah Afridi, Abrar Ahmed

FALL OF WICKETS: 1-27 (Sahibzada), 2-27 (Babar), 3-30 (Salman Agha), 4-54 (Saim), 5-115 (Fakhar)

BOWLING: Ngarava 4-0-30-1 (2w), Maposa 3.2-0-29-1, Evans 4-0-26-2 (1nb), Raza 4-0-29-0 (1nb), Bennett 1-0-4-0, Cremer 3-0-27-1

RESULT: Pakistan won by five wickets.

PLAYER-OF-THE-MATCH: Mohammad Nawaz

Alcaraz out of Davis Cup finale with injury

BOLOGNA: Spain's world number one Carlos Alcaraz will miss the Davis Cup Final 8 tournament in Italy this week due to injury, the two-time Wimbledon champion posted on X on Tuesday.

"I am very sorry to announce that I will not be able to play with Spain in the Davis Cup in Bologna. I have swelling in my right hamstring and the medical advice is not to play," the 22-year-old six-time Grand Slam winner said.

"I've always said that playing for Spain is the greatest thing there is and I was really looking forward to helping the team fight for the Davis Cup trophy."

Alcaraz's announcement comes two days after he lost to arch rival Jannik Sinner, the Italian world number two, 7-6(7/4), 7-5 in the ATP Finals title-decider in Turin.

Sinner had already announced he would miss the tournament, with hosts Italy aiming for a third title in a row.

Italy's second-highest ranked player, Lorenzo Musetti has also pulled out of Italy's defence as his wife is expecting a child.

"Those are very three specific cases," International Tennis Federation chief executive Ross Hutchins told AFP.

"You can actually understand why those cases have happened this year," he added.

Austria, France, Belgium, Czech Republic, Argentina and Germany are the other countries vying for victory in Bologna.—AFP

England's Ashes bid hinges on first two Tests, says Broad

PERTH: England must look to stamp their authority on the Ashes series in Australia early or risk succumbing to yet another defeat Down Under, former England bowler Stuart Broad has warned.

England last won the Ashes in 2015 and have not won in Australia since 2011, with Australia winning their last three home series 5-0, 4-0 and 4-0.

The Ashes series openers in Australia have traditionally been held at The Gabba in Brisbane, where England last won a match in 1986, but this series will begin with a match in Perth instead.

"England have to win the first Test to stand a chance of winning the Ashes," Broad said in an appearance on the 'Odds Law' podcast.

"Our record's shocking at the Gabba. That's why it's a small advantage that the first Test isn't there this time... I think it will all be on the first two Test matches, if I'm honest.

"If England don't get anything out of the first two, then that's a major problem because in Australia, the energy, the flow of the whole country will build up and then you're fighting a bit of a losing battle."

England will head into the series with arguably their quickest fast-bowling lineup in years, featuring Mark Wood, Jofra Archer, Gus Atkinson, Josh Tongue and Brydon Carse, while captain Ben Stokes is also expected to bowl.

While all eyes will be on the blistering pace of Wood and Archer, Broad said he expected good performances from Atkinson, who broke into England's squad in 2024 and has taken 63 wickets in 13 Test appearances.

"He hasn't been talked about enough because everyone's focusing on Jofra Archer, Mark Wood, and Ben Stokes returning to bowling," Broad added.

"But I think Gus could be the one who becomes a mainstay of the attack. He could do really nicely in Australia and be that consistent bowler that Stokes can lean on to bowl a lot of overs.

"He's got a nice, short stride pattern, can go through the gears, and can play a great supporting role to the quicker bowlers who might rotate through the series."

The first Test begins on Friday.—Reuters

Shaheens crush UAE by nine wickets in Rising Stars Asia Cup

DOHA: Pakistan Shaheens completed a dominant group stage campaign in the Rising Stars Asia Cup with a comprehensive nine-wicket victory over the United Arab Emirates in their final Group 'B' fixture at West End Park International Cricket Stadium here on Tuesday.

Chasing a modest 60, the Shaheens romped home in just 5.2 overs, with 88 balls to spare, courtesy of Maaz Sadaqat's blistering unbeaten 37 off 15 balls — an innings laced with four fours and three sixes.

Earlier, Mohammad Irfan Khan's side won the toss and invited UAE to bat, a decision that paid rich dividends as the Emirati lineup crumbled to 59 all out in 16.1 overs.

The innings never recovered after a torrid start, with UAE slumping to 15-3 inside the first four overs. Sohaib Khan's painstaking two off 14 balls ended with a spectacular catch by skipper Irfan off Ahmed Daniyal.

Syed Haider offered the only semblance of resistance with 20 from 19 deliveries, but once Maaz removed him in the 10th over, the lower order collapsed spectacularly, losing their last six wickets for just 17 runs.

Left-arm spinner Sufiyan Muqeem was the pick of the bowlers with excellent figures of 3-12 in four overs, while Maaz and Ahmed Daniyal claimed two wickets apiece.

The victory — Pakistan Shaheens' third consecutive win — propelled them to the top of Group 'B' and secured a semi-final spot. The semi-finals are scheduled for Friday, 21 November.

Maaz, who has now collected three Player-of-the-Match awards in as many games, has amassed 212 runs in the tournament and continues to be the standout performer for the second-string side.

In the chase, Maaz and Mohammad Ghazi Ghori (unbeaten 16) added an unbroken 54 for the second wicket to seal the contest in emphatic fashion.

Scores in brief:

UAE 59 in 18 overs (Syed Haider 20; Sufyan Moqim 3-12, Ahmed Daniyal 2-7, Maaz Sadaqat 2-19); PAKISTAN SHAHEENS 61-1 in 5.2 overs (Maaz Sadaqat 37 not out).—Agencies

Injured Mitchell ruled out of ODIs against WI

WELLINGTON: In-form Black Caps batsman Daryl Mitchell has been ruled out of the last two matches in the One-day International series against West Indies with a minor groin muscle tear, New Zealand Cricket said on Tuesday.

A hobbling Mitchell struck 119 in New Zealand's seven-run win in the first match of the three-game series in Christchurch on Sunday, with scans after revealing a minor groin tear.

NZC said the injury would require only two weeks of rehabilitation, leaving Mitchell free to take part in the three-match Test series against the tourists starting in Christchurch on Dec 2.

"It's always tough being ruled out of a series early on with injury, particularly when you're in hot form like Daryl is," said coach Rob Walter. "He has been our standout performer in the ODI format so far this summer, so he'll be missed for two important matches."

Henry Nicholls had been called in as a replacement and will now remain with the squad for the rest of the ODI series, which continues in Napier on Wednesday. The third ODI is in Hamilton on Saturday.—Agencies

US will make it easier for World Cup fans to get visa appointments

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump on Monday unveiled special fast-track visas for people with tickets to FIFA World Cup matches taking place next year — but his administration warned it was no guarantee of entry to the United States.

The United States has promised a seamless experience for next year's tournament despite concerns that Trump's border crackdown could hurt fans.

Washington will set up a scheduling system for visa-interview appointments that prioritizes foreign fans attending World Cup matches, which will take place from June 11 to July 19 in 11 US cities. Mexico and Canada will also host matches.

"For those who intend to join us for the World Cup, I strongly encourage you to apply right away," Trump said as he announced the scheme in the Oval Office with Gianni Infantino, the boss of global football body FIFA.

Trump told reporters in the Oval Office that government agencies had worked "to ensure that soccer fans from all around the world are properly vetted and able to come to the US next summer easily."

The president said his administration had sped up visa issuance for people in most countries, with the wait time now 60 days or fewer. He said the World Cup could generate $30 billion and create 200,000 jobs.

Infantino — who has repeatedly appeared at Trump's side since the Republican's return to the White House in January — said the so-called "FIFA Pass" was a "very important announcement."

"If you have a ticket for the World Cup, you can have a prioritized appointment to get your visa," Infantino said. "We'll have between five and 10 million people coming to America from all over the world to enjoy the World Cup, and with this FIFA pass, we can make sure that those who buy a ticket, that are legitimate football fans or soccer fans, they can come and attend the World Cup in the best conditions."

Over one million tickets have been purchased so far by fans from 212 countries, FIFA said. In a statement, the football governing body said ticket holders would receive more information about the priority visa appointment system in early 2026.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio said the State Department added 400 consular officers to process visas, doubling the presence in certain countries.

"The US is offering prioritized appointments so fans can complete their visa interviews and show they qualify," Rubio said.

Rubio however issued a warning to those hoping to come for the tournament. "Your ticket is not a visa," Rubio said at the announcement. "It doesn't guarantee admission to the US. It guarantees you an expedited appointment, you're still going to go through the same vetting."

Rubio said ticket holders would get an interview within six to eight weeks under the plan but urged people to act now. "Don't wait till the last minute," he said.

Trump has made the World Cup a centerpiece event of both his second presidency and the 250th anniversary of US independence next year.

But the giant sporting extravaganza has not escaped the political turmoil caused by Trump's hardline stance on a host of issues.

Trump has raised the possibility of moving games from certain host cities amid a crackdown on what he says is crime and migration in some Democratic-run cities.

The draw for the World Cup is due to take place in Washington on December 5.

US president Donald Trump sits next to FIFA president Gianni Infantino, as he meets with the White House Task Force on the FIFA World Cup 2026 in the Oval Office at the White House. —Reuters

FIFA will present a new peace prize on the same day, with widespread speculation that it could go to Trump.—Agencies